

HOW PEOPLE BECOME MORAL--IS KOHLBERG
CORRECT AND HAS HE TOLD US ENOUGH?

Vincent Luizzi

Lawrence Kohlberg's cross-cultural studies on one's becoming a moral agent and his basic findings that all men can and do move through similar stages of moral development, some reaching the lofty sixth

Professor Luizzi is in the Department of Philosophy at Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas.

level, have been of interest, and are now familiar, to moral philosophers, psychologists, and educators alike.¹ One feature of the Kohlberg teachings is that because particular virtues do not exist, it makes no sense to argue over how one can acquire them. Thus, a view such as Aristotle's, that one acquires them jointly or severally through habituation, cannot even get off the ground. Moral development, for Kohlberg, involves one's moving toward the single ideal of justice by ascending the various stages of moral development; the acts of the morally mature agent are characterized by his fair and equal treatment of all. I wish here to challenge Kohlberg's wholesale rejection of the Aristotelian position by pointing out that, in particular, his reasons for denying the existence of particular virtues are wrong-headed and, in general, he has obscured a number of relevant issues impinging on his theory of moral development. I then wish to argue that some virtues or qualities worthy of acquiring or displaying have little if anything to do with being just, and how one comes to behave in such a way is still at issue. I then suggest that it is not incompatible to hold Kohlberg's view concerning one's development into a just man along with a limited Aristotelian view, the main point being that some further theory is needed to operate with Kohlberg's, if Kohlberg's is accepted and that the Aristotelian position, properly restricted, is at least a candidate.

Kohlberg's Argument Against Aristotle and Initial Observations of the Argument.

Kohlberg tells us that, in developing his Platonic view, he is "challenging a brand of common sense first enunciated by Aristotle."² He refers to the set of virtues, which includes trustworthiness, loyalty, helpfulness, and the like, all of which one is to acquire to become a moral agent, as a "bag of virtues" and claims that "the objection of the psychologist to the bag of virtues is that there are no such things."³ Take honesty for example. Studies show that the occurrences of honest behavior are distributed on a bell curve with most people cheating sometimes and a few, a great deal or very little. The irresistible inference is that Kohlberg, being a psychologist himself and thus realizing that there is no such thing as packagable virtues, can reject Aristotle who thought that there are such things.

Even at first glance, one may have doubts about this reasoning. While the psychologists' evidence may suggest, as a descriptive matter, that no one is one hundred per cent honest, it does not neces-

sarily follow that honesty as a virtue does not exist and thus cannot be acquired. It may very well be that what we mean by one's possessing the virtue of honesty allows for deviations from absolute honesty and that certain acts of dishonesty do not in fact preclude our calling a particular agent honest nor lead us to infer that there is no such thing as honesty, even if all cheated to some extent. I may sensibly say that a lawyer is honest when he gives a strong closing argument without distorting the evidence even though he knows that the evidence, from a different viewpoint, can be interpreted to his client's disfavor. And I may sensibly say that my car dealer is honest when he delivers a reliable auto as promised even though he lied about its giving me a vibrant, new personality.

Let us look more carefully at Kohlberg's argument against Aristotle and expose more clearly just what its defects are. I take Kohlberg's argument roughly to be this:

1. Either an Aristotelian view on the acquisition of moral virtue is correct or a Platonic view is correct.⁴

2. If the Aristotelian view is correct, one comes to display virtuous activity, say honesty, by acquiring the virtue of honesty.

3. One can acquire the virtue of honesty by doing honest deeds only if the virtue of honesty exists.

4. But neither honesty nor any other virtue exists in any absolute form.

5. Hence, the Aristotelian position must be incorrect. (4, 3, 2, *modus tollens*)

6. Hence, the Platonic view is correct.

Further Difficulties with Kohlberg's Argument

With the argument in this more perspicuous form, it can be seen more clearly that two major lines of objection are open. On the one hand, the argument appears to be *prima facie* invalid and unsound. As for its invalidity, the idea expressed in (4), that there is no "absolute honesty," is not sufficient to deny the consequent of (3), which deals with whether "honesty exists." One might argue that the argument is unsound by challenging the truth of (4), drawing attention to the fact that Kohlberg's evidence in support of (4) is not to the point; why should evidence concerning how people in fact act have anything to do with how and whether virtues exist? Moral philosophy may be required, at times, to make room for empirical findings of moral psychology and to cast off some of its dogmas. But no moral psychologist can, under the cloak of "new data," ignore the demands of

logic and proper inference in the construal of his evidence and expect the burden of revision to fall on the moral philosopher.

On the other hand, and more important to my mind, is the objection that the reasoning displayed here sorely displays a lack of awareness of the parameters of the various issues being addressed, not to mention an obscuring and co-mingling of the issues themselves. An identification of these issues, their scope, and an awareness that, depending on where one stands on each of these a range of positions can be distinguished, helps to support this allegation. In addition, such an identification helps to clarify the problems Kohlberg is tacitly dealing with as well as helping to further expose the deficiencies of the argument above.

The issues I speak of are these: (1) whether virtues exist, (2) whether and why virtuous activity is displayed in some agent, (3) how one comes to display such activity, (4) what we mean by various types of virtuous activity, and (5) how people actually act with regard to virtuous activity so understood.

Possible Positions One Might Take on Each of These Issues and Kohlberg's Lack of Clarity With Regard to Where He Stands

As mentioned, each of these issues admits of more than one interpretation. As for the existence of virtues, one may entertain some theory of Platonic forms or real essences and question whether they exist. Does the essence or form of loyalty, for example, enjoy an ontological status on a level of reality higher than our world of sense experience? Or do such real essences or virtues exist but only in particular people and events; do we have honest people and are there honest acts only because the real essence of honesty resides therein? A third possibility is that there are no existing real essences, yet virtues exist, no two alike; there are many types of honesty that really exist either independently of particular people and events or (and this is a fourth possibility) only embodied by them. Further one may hold that virtues exist and believe only that a certain type of personality or activity is displayed, without giving any special ontological status to the virtues themselves. And finally, virtues may exist but have a dependent existence. For example, it may be that there is some real essence or form or concept-object of honesty, but its existence is dependent upon the existence of some other real essence or form or concept-object such as justice, or goodness, or wisdom.

The questions of whether and why virtuous activity is displayed are

clearly independent of the issue of whether virtues exist in any of the senses above. Actors may display honesty but that allows us to infer little as to which of the above positions on the existence of virtues is correct. Assuming, however, that virtuous activity is displayed, one may ask why; what is the cause? Again, the possibilities are several, some drawing on the answer to the first question regarding the existence of virtues. For example, one may display honesty because he participates in, or has a total understanding and awareness of, the real essence of honesty which has some transcendent reality. On a mechanistic model, one may account for this behavior by saying that the agent is in some particular brain state because of the present physio-chemical state of his body. Or he may display such activity because he has, in some way, acquired, and is now in possession of, some virtue that actually exists. I say acquired in some way, since the particular manner in which a virtue is acquired is a matter that admits of separate treatment and to which we can now turn.

One may acquire a virtue or become virtuous, on one theory, by practicing and forming a habit; one becomes honest by acting honestly over and over. This view has it that virtues are acquired and can be learned. Adherents of another view, who agree that virtue can be learned, hold that one learns not each particular virtue but some single ideal and virtuous activity issues forth upon so learning the ideal. Opposed to each of these is the position that virtue cannot be taught or learned, that it is something either one has or does not have by nature. Advocates of such a theory might point out that if virtue can be taught, why is it that the sons of virtuous men often are not virtuous; and do we not hear all too often parents asking where they went wrong when one of their children, raised similarly to the others, turns out to be a bad egg, a black sheep, or some such object clearly lacking in virtue.

As for the category of what is meant by virtuous activity, the fundamental division is between linguistic absolutists and non-absolutists. The absolutists hold that however virtues exist, however they are acquired, we cannot refer to activity as honest or just unless the agent is one hundred per cent honest or just. The non-absolutists, on the other hand, indicate that we simply do or should allow for deviations from absolute virtue in our references to, say, honest or just activity. As to why we should so allow, the non-absolutist may point out that an essential feature of humans is that they are always "becoming" in their pursuit of virtue and that our withholding

the appellation of one's activity as honest, unless the agent is totally honest, only hinders the moral development, as there is no positive reinforcement through rewards.

Finally we come to the category of how people actually act. Regardless of what we mean by one's acting honestly, for example, the question still remains as to whether people, as a factual matter, never lie or sometimes lie. From this we can isolate the factual absolutist and non-absolutist positions, the former holding that there are people who never lie and the latter, that all people lie sometimes. One might identify, to complete the picture, a view never held, that all people always lie.

It should be stressed not only that there are these five relevant and distinct categories concerning virtue but also that these categories and range of views within each category can operate independently of each other and can be combined in varying ways to produce any one of a number of positions on virtue. For example, one may hold that some real essence, honesty, exists, that humans who display this virtue in some way participate in this essence, that such humans that do so participate were born with this ability, that what we mean by such humans so participating is that their activity is more or less honest, and that, as a matter of fact, most people do not act in this way.

Now Kohlberg seems to think that evidence that suggests that men, in fact, do not act absolutely honestly forces us to conclude that individual virtues, such as honesty, do not exist, and hence the truth of premise (4). And this allows him to deny each of the consequents of propositions (3) and (4) of his argument and ultimately to reject the Aristotelian position. However, as I have attempted to point out with the analysis above, the inference that individual virtues do not exist based on evidence that men do not act absolutely honestly is cryptic, ambiguous, and disregarding of other possible inferences. Kohlberg, it would seem, would need to address himself to the questions of just why other moves are closed, in what sense individual virtues do not exist, why the non-absolutist position is untenable, and so on.

Is Kohlberg's Account of Moral Development Complete?

Having seen that Kohlberg's rejection of the Aristotelian position was hasty and improper, we might now briefly inquire into the merits of Kohlberg's views on moral education. For even if his reasons for rejecting the Aristotelian position were wrongheaded, it may very

well be that his own account of moral development is cogent and worthy of acceptance. In so considering, we might ask whether Kohlberg provides us with a complete account of moral development or whether his account, as far as it goes, can be reasonably extended to account for how one comes to display the various positive qualities of good character.

On Kohlberg's view, it is clear that the single virtue or ideal of justice essentially involves others, and this is not surprising, since it would be odd indeed to speak of acting justly were one isolated from, and had no contact with, others. At one point Kohlberg tells us that justice is a moral principle, that "a moral principle is a principle for resolving competing claims," and that "there is only one principled basis for resolving competing claims: Justice or equality. ... As a reason for acting, justice is called respect for persons."⁵ It is not difficult to appreciate Kohlberg's point that many features or qualities that we attribute to agents may be seen as aspects of justice as understood above; one may view my honesty, my loyalty to friends, my tolerance for views, races, and religions different from my own as expressions of my well developed sense of justice.

On the other hand, it is not at all clear what, if anything, other qualities worthy of acquiring or displaying have to do with justice. Those who are industrious, those tranquil in the face of adversity, those inquiring and creative and thrifty display some of the qualities I speak of. Now it seems quite clear that Kohlberg's just man need not display these qualities, giving that acting justly involves how we act towards others. And Kohlberg need not view the moral man as anything more than the just man. Yet, the question still arises as to how one acquires or comes to display qualities of this sort, whether or not they are associated with one's moral development, which could be understood in some more general sense that incorporated these qualities. I see no means of Kohlberg's stretching his Platonic account to cover questions as to how qualities that do not bear on acting justly are developed, acquired, or displayed. On the other hand, one would expect that the Aristotelian might easily expand his theory with, or declare as part of the theory already outlined, the view that these qualities, as with qualities like honesty, are acquired individually through practice. If Kohlberg's view accounts for how we learn to display only a certain set of the positive or desirable qualities we would want an individual to display, then his view cannot be a complete alternative to the (expanded) Aristotelian account.

While Kohlberg's view may be correct as far as it goes, it seems

clear that some further theory is needed to operate in tandem with his if we are to account for one's acquiring or displaying qualities analytically separable from the qualities of the just man. And recognizing that Kohlberg's dismissal of the Aristotelian view, that virtues are acquired individually by practice, was without ground, that view can possibly work with Kohlberg's for a complete theory of how we teach people to acquire or display that activity and those qualities we consider desirable. Certainly Kohlberg may in fact wish to account for the acquisition of these other qualities in a manner other than by employing the Aristotelian move. If so, we must hear from him on this issue. The point here is that Kohlberg's view alone is not a complete alternative to the Aristotelian position, that his critique of the Aristotelian position was not cogent, and that, if one accepts Kohlberg's view as far as it goes, it is possible to supplement it with an Aristotelian position.

REFERENCES

¹I provide the following editing of Kohlberg's description of his theory to acquaint any reader not yet familiar with Kohlberg's work with the essentials of his views: "In all cultures we find the same forms of moral thinking. There are six forms of thinking and they constitute an invariant sequence of stages in each culture... Stage 1: ...Egocentric deference to superior power or prestige... Stage 2: ...Right action is that instrumentally satisfying self's needs and occasionally others'... Stage 3: ...Orientation to approval and to pleasing and helping others... Stage 4: ...Orientation to "doing duty" and to showing respect for authority and maintaining the given social order for its own sake... Stage 5: ...Duty defined in terms of contract, general avoidance of violation of the will or rights of others, and majority will and welfare. Stage 6: ...Orientation not only to actually ordained social rules but to principles of choice involving appeal to logical universality and consistency." Lawrence Kohlberg, "Education for Justice: A Modern Statement of the Platonic View," *Moral Education*, with an introduction by Nancy F. and Theodore R.Sizer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 70-72.

²*Ibid.*, p. 59.

³*Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴I will not here be concerned with whether Kohlberg has interpreted Plato and Aristotle correctly. Rather, I here explore whether Kohlberg's reasoning, given his particular understanding of Plato and

Aristotle, is cogent. I thus refer to these positions as Platonic and Aristotelian.

⁵Kohlberg, p. 70.